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Use and Evaluation of a Statewide 4-H Volunteer Newsletter

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Use and Evaluation of a Statewide 4-H Volunteer Newsletter

Abstract

The Ohio 4-H Cloverbud Connections newsletter is a statewide publication targeted for volunteers working with K - 2 youth. Two statewide surveys in Ohio were conducted with 4-H volunteers and 4-H Extension staff to measure the usefulness and utilization of the newsletter. Results indicated 4-H Cloverbud volunteers and 4-H staff utilize the newsletter and consider it a valuable resource. Ninety-seven percent of the 4-H Cloverbud volunteers and 4-H staff want the newsletter continued. Findings indicate the importance of 4-H Cloverbud activities for readers, need for more awareness of the newsletter Web site, and importance of 4-H Cloverbud volunteer training.

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Introduction and Objectives

The *4-H Cloverbud Connections* newsletter is an innovative, statewide publication targeted specifically for volunteers working with K - 2 youth. The newsletter, published quarterly since 1997, contains five sections: a headline article, 4-H Cloverbud activity section, Campus Connection, snack recipe, and educational articles. Recently, it has been made accessible over the Internet to new audiences <<http://cloverbudconnections.osu.edu>>. With this Internet portal, the newsletter is available to other Extension programs beyond Ohio.

According to the research literature, newsletters are a cost-effective, beneficial delivery method for educational and training purposes (Nelson, 1986; Dickinson & Cudaback, 1992; Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Garton et al., 2003). Also, parents of young children preferred receiving information through reading (68%) over meetings (16%), and audio tapes (4%) (Hennon & Peterson, 1981). The authors of the study described here conducted an initial evaluation of the *4-H Cloverbud Connections* newsletter by Extension staff (Zimmer, Scheer, & Shriner, 1999). The current study evaluated the newsletter as reported not only by Extension staff, but also by the volunteer leaders who actually conduct the 4-H program. The investigation will not only help the 4-H program in Ohio, but other Extension program areas using this form of education, especially during times of budget crisis.

There were four objectives of the investigation: 1) determine the volunteers' perceived knowledge

gained from the newsletter, 2) measure usefulness of newsletter sections according to 4-H Extension staff and volunteers, 3) learn how volunteers utilize the newsletter, and 4) identify the greatest challenges faced by 4-H Cloverbud volunteers.

Methods and Sample

The data collection instruments targeted two groups: 4-H Cloverbud volunteers and 4-H Extension staff. Questions included in the volunteer and staff surveys were developed by the authors through a review of the literature. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The instruments were piloted with 4-H staff and volunteers for content validity and clarity. Minor revisions were made.

The volunteer questionnaire was attached to the winter 2002 issue of the newsletter, which was distributed to all county Extension offices through the state office's mail system during January 2002. Each county was responsible for copying and mailing the materials to its 4-H Cloverbud volunteers. The newsletter's headline article was "Help Evaluate the *4-H Cloverbud Connections Newsletter*," thus focusing attention on the survey and encouraging volunteers to complete it.

The staff survey was attached to a cover letter and mailed to 4-H Extension staff in all 88 Ohio counties. The 4-H Extension staff were given 1 month to complete the survey. An e-mail notice was sent to the 4-H list-serve reminding staff to complete the survey.

As an incentive, attached to the volunteer and staff questionnaires was a coupon to enter a drawing for a limited edition Ohio 4-H Centennial Longaberger Basket. As the completed questionnaires were returned, office staff separated them from the coupons before they were given to the authors for review.

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis was conducted in consultation with the Program Development and Evaluation (PDE) Team at OSU Extension. The PDE Leader and the secondary author coded the responses to the qualitative survey questions independently using the constant comparative method to identify themes in the data. The constant comparative method is the process of repeatedly comparing responses with previous responses in an attempt to discover new dimensions and/or new relationships (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). The themes were found to be consistent across coders and are summarized in the results.

In all, 77 4-H Extension staff (66 Extension educators, 9 program assistants, and 2 with other 4-H program responsibilities [66% response rate]) and 205 volunteers responded to the questionnaire. Volunteers in 49 counties returned questionnaires. The response rate for volunteers could not be determined because of the dissemination process as explained earlier. Of the volunteer respondents, 98% were female; 78% lived on a farm or in a small town or rural area; 46% had children and/or grandchildren in their 4-H Cloverbud group; 81% had been active as a volunteer for five or fewer years; and 18% were first year volunteers.

Findings and Results

Volunteers indicated their knowledge gained from the newsletter on a 6-point scale ranging from 6 = much to 1 = none. Forty-nine percent (95) reported knowledge gained at levels 5 & 6 on the scale, whereas 87% (119) indicated knowledge gained at levels of 4, 5, or 6.

Extension 4-H staff were asked how they would rate the newsletter on a variety of issues, including usefulness, presentation, educational balance, and contribution to the program. They rated seven variables on a 4-point scale: excellent, good, fair, or poor (Table 1). Ninety-five percent of the respondents rated the newsletter's contribution to K-2 programming as excellent or good.

According to the data, the reading comprehension level of the newsletter was viewed as appropriate. When 4-H staff were asked about the usefulness of the newsletter, 64% rated it as excellent for 4-H Cloverbud volunteers, and 49% rated the newsletter as excellent for 4-H staff. According to the 4-H Extension staff, 95% indicated that presentation of new ideas via the newsletter was excellent or good, and 63% said the ease to replicate activities was excellent.

Table 1.
4-H Extension Staff Perception of *4-H Cloverbud Connections* Newsletter

Indicator	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Fair (%)	Poor (%)
Contribution to K-2 Programming	52.1	42.5	5.5	0
Reading comprehension level	58.9	39.7	1.4	0
Usefulness for 4-H Cloverbud volunteers	64.4	32.9	2.7	0

Usefulness for 4-H Youth Development Educators	48.6	43.2	8.1	0
Presentation of new ideas	47.7	47.7	5.4	0
Ease to replicate activities	63.5	36.5	0	0
Balance of educational and activity content	56.2	42.5	1.4	0

Seventy-three percent of the 4-H staff said they utilized *4-H Cloverbud Connections* one - six times over the past year for information. Fifty percent were willing to share a program from their county or write an article for an upcoming issue about K-2 activities or an educational topic. When asked about continuing the newsletter as a resource for 4-H Cloverbud programming, 97% were in favor of the newsletter's continuation.

4-H volunteers and staff were asked to rank the usefulness of each section of the newsletter using a 4-point scale: 4 = very useful, 3 = useful, 2 = not so useful, and 1 = not useful at all. The 4-H Cloverbud volunteers and 4-H Extension staff indicated the most useful sections of the newsletter were 4-H Cloverbud activities and educational articles (Table 2). Staff deemed each section of the newsletter slightly more useful than 4-H Cloverbud volunteers. However, 99% of the volunteers and 99% of the staff rated the overall usefulness of the newsletter as very useful or useful.

Table 2.
Newsletter Usefulness Perceived by Volunteers and Staff

	4-H Cloverbud Volunteers N=205	Ohio 4-H Extension Staff N=77
Category	Percent Very Useful & Useful	Percent Very Useful & Useful
Cover Page Article	95%	99%
4-H Cloverbud Activity	99%	100%
Educational Article	98%	100%
Campus Connection	82%	87%
Snack Recipe	93%	94%
Overall Usefulness	99%	99%

When 4-H Cloverbud volunteers were asked what they most often did with the newsletter, 89% specified they read it and used its ideas or read it and filed it for future use. According to the data, 97% of the 4-H Cloverbud volunteers indicated they wanted to continue receiving the *4-H Cloverbud Connections* newsletter.

Both instruments contained questions that required short answers in order to elicit responses rich in meaning. Volunteers provided 461 different responses to the question "What are your three greatest challenges as a 4-H Cloverbud volunteer?" From these, two primary themes emerged:

"keeping the Cloverbuds attention/making interesting" (108 responses) and "coming up with new ideas/activities" (57 responses). These themes were closely related to those that resulted from staff responses to the question "What are the three greatest challenges faced by 4-H Cloverbud volunteers?" Primary themes from staff were: "age and skill appropriate activities" (35 responses), "dealing with different developmental stages of 5-8 year olds" (19 responses), and "keeping the program non-competitive" (19 responses).

To facilitate the sharing of ideas, volunteers were asked to describe one or two 4-H Cloverbud activities/events that were successful. Volunteers provided 211 responses that were categorized into the themes as given in Table 3. To enhance understanding, a verbatim response is listed with each theme.

Table 3.
Successful 4-H Cloverbud Activities Perceived by Volunteers

Theme	Number of Responses	Example of a Verbatim Response
Crafts	51	"Learning about and making crafts about the Olympics - we made torches out of paper towel rolls and tissue paper, gold medals from can lids, and rings out of paper plates."
Group programs	39	"We go around to the cemeteries to plant flowers. We've had a lot of compliments on that. Gives the kids a chance to do something kind."
Other educational	26	"Taught about handicaps by printing name on paper, used cut outs of sign languages to show name for deaf person and glued corn to show name in Braille for sightless person."
Cooking/Nutrition	23	"My group likes the treats you suggest. We try to do them all as a group for snack time."
Field trips/Guest speakers	22	"Fishing party - learned about fish, pond life etc. Snack of goldfish crackers and gummy worms."
4-H club related	21	"Our kids enjoy helping the 4-H'ers with our annual trash pick up. It helps them to feel important."
County fair related	15	"Cloverbud corner (display of Cloverbud activities) in a 4-H booth at the county fair."
Individual activities	14	"Using long sheets of freezer paper, the kids stepped (barefooted) in washable paint then, while holding an adult's hand, stepped onto the paper. We used the 'tracks' as a theme for our 4-H booth. It was cute and colorful as the kids got to choose their color of paint."

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based upon the study findings, the Ohio 4-H Cloverbud Connections newsletter has received very wide usage throughout Ohio by 4-H Cloverbud volunteers and Ohio 4-H Extension staff. These findings support the authors' research conducted with Ohio 4-H Youth Development Educators during 1999. In addition, the results can be extended to similar Extension systems beyond Ohio for

improving Web- and print-based newsletters.

The following recommendations have been developed to improve the newsletter and its accessibility for readers:

Include more 4-H Cloverbud activities for volunteers to use with K-2 youth.

Continually educate 4-H Cloverbud volunteers about program policy and procedures. (The 4-H Cloverbud volunteer respondents had an average tenure of 5 years or less with the 4-H Cloverbud program, thus increasing the need for volunteer training.)

Include a standard 4-H Cloverbud volunteer job description in an upcoming newsletter to coach volunteers concerning their responsibilities.

Update the *4-H Cloverbud Connections* Web site <<http://cloverbudconnections.osu.edu>> and market its availability to 4-H clientele and Extension staff in Ohio and other states. Promote the Web site, and encourage Extension staff to add this link to their Web pages.

Encourage Ohio 4-H staff to mail the quarterly newsletter to their 4-H Cloverbud volunteers.

Disseminate research findings and provide strategies for evaluating newsletter publications.

Allow the newsletter to serve as a collaborative model across program areas and between county-state levels for positive program implementation.

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